



The promise and peril of knowing together: Lessons from farmer discussion groups and schools of philosophy for extension workers, 1934-1946

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Summary

As a society we currently face complex, wicked challenges that have yet to be effectively addressed through technocratic expertise. A dominant narrative is that higher education's role is to offer unbiased, objective expertise for the betterment of society. Scott Peters calls this the heroic meta-narrative where relationship between academics and citizens operate as one-directional informational transfers (2007, 2010). Yet there are counter-narratives about how academics engage in public work. Specifically, some faculty believe that citizens are important contributors to democratic society and the role of academics is to co-create public goods with them (Boyer, 1996; Boyte, 2004).

While language to describe this engagement has only recently emerged, we find commonalities with earlier times. M. L. Wilson wrote about interconnected complexities and interdependence and touched on the importance of knowledge and judgment as well as the need for collaborative work between academic experts and citizens (1939a; 1939b).

Motivated by desires to solve agricultural problems while advancing democratic ideals, USDA administrators (Wilson included) established a deliberative democracy initiative in 1934 composed of two parts: “farmer discussion groups,” and “Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers” that were organized by USDA staff with presentations by university faculty and group discussion with all participants about the presented topics.

Despite the “democratic” motivations of program developers, the American Farm Bureau Federation and many Extension administrators and agents defunded them. In this paper, I argue that this can be seen as a prophetic story about the promise of public philosophy that positions experts as civic professionals who work with and for the people to advance economic, political, and cultural ideals.

This paper will appeal to those interested in public work and the tensions related to creating and sustaining democratic spaces where academics and “ordinary” citizens co-create knowledge to address public problems.

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